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ABSTRACT

Independent study is encouraged at Metropolitan State University, a nontraditional upper-divisional university for adult students. At Metropolitan, independent study refers to a range of learning experiences varying in independence from faculty-designed and -selected programmed learning to completely student-designed projects reviewed and evaluated by faculty. Students register in one of two categories of independent study: faculty-designed or student-designed. Students initiate student-designed independent studies, beginning with an idea, seeking consultation with faculty, finding resources, drawing up a plan with a supervising faculty member, and submitting a proposal for university review. Quality control measures include teaching students the meaning of college-level learning and how to use independent study, training faculty in designing and supervising independent study, assisting individual advisors who help the students maintain the integrity of the degree program, maintaining academic centers that oversee independent studies, and maintaining the independent study office that collects data on all independent studies. Independent studies need to be organized, provide for personal contact, and require evaluation by students. Problems to overcome regarding independent study are faculty resistance, a low image, and students' fear. (YLB)

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INDEPENDENT STUDY FOR ADULTS IN NON-TRADITIONAL HIGHER EDUCATION

An adaptation for publication of a paper
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INDEPENDENT STUDY FOR ADULTS IN NON-TRADITIONAL HIGHER EDUCATION

Metropolitan State University was established in May of 1971 as a nontraditional upper-division university designed to meet the needs of adult students who had not been well served by other institutions of higher education. The university encourages--and teaches--its students to use alternative learning strategies and to seek credit for college level learning gained outside academic settings. A small core of 25 to 30 resident faculty direct the academic program. Most of the teaching is done by a group of over 400 adjunct, or as we call them, community faculty.

The mean age of Metro U students is 35.5 years, the median age 33.3 years. Forty-one percent of our students fall into the 31-40 years of age category. Sixty percent are female, 40% male. Fifty-nine percent are married. Almost all, 98%, live in Minnesota, and 73% live in the seven-county metropolitan area of St. Paul-Minneapolis. Five point nine percent are minorities, a number which reflects roughly the total minority population of the metropolitan area. Eighty-eight percent of our students work at least 30 hours a week--and many work more than forty hours.

You need but use your imagination to reflect on these figures and understand why traditional ways of completing a college degree would not be appropriate for such students.

From the beginning, the Metro U program encouraged students to develop skills for lifelong learning. All students must complete an individualized educational planning course, during which they relate their previous postsecondary education, their experiential learning, and their professional personal goals to Metro U's educational philosophy. Out of this process issues an individualized degree plan for every student. Only upon completion of an adequate degree plan will the student achieve degree candidacy. In this individualized educational planning

course, or IEP, the faculty teach students how to plan a degree program that, in addition to reflecting appropriate content for the B.A. degree, uses a variety of learning strategies, including independent study. Independent study receives particular emphasis when I teach IEP, since I believe that this is an importnat way students exercise some authority over their education, learn to use community resources, and develop some skills for lifelong, self-directed learning--three basic tenets of the Metro U philosophy.

With that background, let us look more closely at independent study itself, which accounts for 18%--this percentage varies from 16 to 20% from year to year--of the total registrations at Metro U. (Other categories of registration, incidentally, include Metro U courses, posting of other institutional courses, assessment of experiential learning, and internships.) You may be interested in how this eight percent breaks down by content area. The largest percentage of total independent study registrations this academic year--35%--was in the Business and Public Administration area. Arts and Sciences captured 31%, Human Services 27%, and Communications 7%.

I think it's important to say that this percentage does not necessarily reflect an enthusiasm for independent study. Our experience at Metro, in spite of our efforts to have students pursue alternative routes to college credit, has been that adult students generally prefer classroom learning. This explains the fact that courses account for three quarters of our registrations at present. We find that even students who have outstanding experiential learning to present for evaluation often prefer to "let the past lie," as they put it, and move on to new learning. At the risk of oversimplifying, I'd say this is in large part due to students' preference for familiar versus unfamiliar ways of learning.

Why then do Metro U students pursue independent study? There are a number of reasons:

-they are unable to find a class in a subject they want to study;

-they are unable to commit themselves to more evenings away from home;
-they have scheduling conflicts, yet need a particular course in sequence;
-they want to design study units based on professional, civic, or family projects;
-they have commitments which prevent them from taking regular evening classes (night or rotating shifts, single parenthood);
-their interest has been piqued by interesting independent studies;
-they hate to drive to class in Minnesota winter weather and hate to stay in town during Minnesota summers;
-they want to add theoretical to practical knowledge;
-they like to work on a one-to-one basis with faculty; or
-they think that independent study is "easy."

Saul Alinsky says the right things happen for the wrong reasons. I have learned to overlook students' motivation for choosing independent study.

I should clarify exactly what we mean by independent study at Metro. If you are familiar with Paul Dressel and Mary Thompson's fine book Independent Study, you will remember their definition: "Independent study is the student's self-directed pursuit of academic competence in as autonomous a manner as he is able to exercise at any particular time."[1] Dressel and Thompson argue that colleges and universities should develop all students' capacities for independent learning, moving them along a "continuum of autonomy" as far as they are capable of going. Dressel and Thompson thus distinguish between independent study as a learning experience and a developable capacity.

As admiring as I am of this idea, and as useful as it has been to me in designing independent studies for students and for myself in training other faculty to do independent study, I want to be clear this this is not the operating definition of the Metro U independent study program. Rather, we use the term independent study to refer to a range of learning experiences, which vary in independence, in the strict sense of that term, from faculty-selected programmed learning to completely student-designed projects, reviewed and evaluated by faculty. We have opted for a variety of approaches to independent study, encouraging faculty to reflect on how--whatever the structure of their particular independent study offerings--they can assess students' capacity for independent work and how they can help students increase that capacity.

One way of defining independent study at Metro U is to say it's a registration category. It's not a course, an internship, or evaluation of experiential learning. Students register in one of two categories--faculty-designed independent study or student-designed independent study. I've often observed these terms really ought to be changed to faculty-initiated and student-initiated independent study, since I've seen the same range of faculty and student "design" in both categories. However, faculty-designed independent studies appear in the catalog and the quarterly schedule--are "offered," if you will. The academic centers of the university have solicited them, reviewed them, filed materials on them, and integrated them into the curriculum. They account for 90% of all independent study registrations. Students, on the other hand, initiate student-designed independent studies, beginning with an idea, seeking consultation with faculty, finding resources to use, drawing up a plan with a supervising faculty member, and submitting that plan for university review.

I'd like to turn now to some examples of both faculty-designed and student-designed independent studies. The first, "Introductory Audio Scriptwriting and Production," was offered by a community faculty member who was on the staff of Minnesota Public Radio and left recently to join National Public Radio here in Washington. This very successful offering showed how independent study can combine study of standard texts with preparation of a useful product. This particular subject matter would not have justified a course, so the independent study made it possible for students to learn something they otherwise couldn't have.

The second example, "Language: Sex Variation," which I direct, has generated considerable student interest. Capitalizing on students' interest in a topic of current social concern, I designed this independent study to help students become more sophisticated readers and writers and to introduce them to this interdisciplinary field of study. Students also plan and carry out an independent research project under my direction--usually original research related to a personal or

professional interest. A few years ago, to decrease students' sense of isolation and to provide everyone pursuing the independent study an opportunity to hear presentations on all the individual research projects, I initiated three group meetings for registrants.

A third example of a successful independent study is entitled "Citizen Power and The Political System." An interesting feature of this independent study is that much of it is built around a series of cassette tapes. Students prepare weekly study questions based on the tapes and selected reading, as well as preparing a final paper.

The fourth faculty-designed independent study example that I want to mention is "Principles of Economics," a programmed learning sequence. You may be familiar with the programmed text, Economic Analysis, on which it is based. The text has been reviewed in the literature on independent study in economics and business. The six-volume set, prepared by the Sterling Institute, covers macro- and microeconomics and international trade. While the other examples of faculty-designed independent study truly reflect the term faculty-designed, this one is really faculty-supervised, in that the supervising faculty member simply prepares evaluations for students based on his standards for successful completion, as documented by their performance on monitored set tests. He rarely sees students engaged in this independent study, though he occasionally talks with one by telephone.

Two relatively recent additions to Arts and Sciences independent study offerings deserve special mention here. Both are exceptionally well designed and have high completion rates. The first, "Twentieth Century English Novel," a prodigious effort by one of our most creative faculty members, shows how evaluation of students' weekly work may be tied to specific learning outcomes directly, providing students valuable feedback on what particular parts of their work need more attention. The second is "Prejudice in American History." The faculty member

offering this independent study has a genius for capitalizing on student interest in social and political matters (he teaches two highly successful courses on "Vietnam" and "The American Character") to expand their grasp of the historic roots of those concerns and their current implications.

As a final example of a faculty-designed independent study, I'd like to describe for you, in the words of the faculty member who offered it--an independent study entitled "Civil Liberties." After describing two other independent studies in the law, which, like the economics one, above, are based on programmed texts, he says

> With respect to the "Civil Liberties" independent study, this is completely open. My normal procedure is to discuss with each student his or her interest in the area and to devise, from that discussion, a reading list, the competence statement, and the measurement techniques with the student. More specifically, the student and I generally decide upon three major areas to study within the general topic. I supply them with reading materials, person contacts, problems, etc. (depending upon the student and that student's interest). The student then prepares three papers for me from each of the three areas. Once again, the papers can cover a wide variety of subjects and might involve a number of different types of presentations.[2]

These examples should give you a sense of the range of types of faculty-designed independent study we offer at Metro.

Now I'd like to move on to student-designed, or student initiated, independent study. As I noted earlier, students must first do the groundwork on these independent studies and then propose them for university review. The student must complete a proposal form, then obtain the counsel and approval of his/her faculty advisor, and submit the form with registration materials. The independent study office conducts a final review of the proposal. Faculty with expertise in the general content area serve as consultants throughout the process, and typically a resident or community faculty member serves as supervisor for the student-designed independent study. I say <u>typically</u>, because we do allow students to use non-Metro U supervisors, after appropriate review. This gives us more flexibility than we would otherwise have.

Before I left the Twin Cities, I flipped through the notebook of approved student-designed independent studies to get some samples for your perusal. There were several that I'd like to call to your attention--one on "Parent-child Relationships," one on "Willa Cather," one on "American Sign Language," one on "Jewish Thought," and one on "Modern American Fiction." A couple of students demonstrated in their proposal how to use community resources to build an acceptable independent study. The Jewish thought independent study, for example, was built around classes at a local temple and the woman who designed the American Sign Language independent study built it around classes in American Sign Language at the Hearing Society. One student developed a community resource herself--a series of classes on parenting for her church--based on her study of parent-child relationships. Finally, I'd like to place the "Willa Cather" and "Modern American Fiction" independent studies in perspective for you by reading to you what the student has written about four student-designed independent studies she did during her tenure at Metro U. This is a student who prefers independent study to the classroom, incidentally. I served as her advisor, and she completed two-faculty designed independent studies with me and a number with other faculty. Here are her words:

> You asked what my student-designed IS planning process was. Of course it varied, but it went roughly like this: idea, several consultations with faculty for suggestions, research, proposal submitted and instructor go-ahead secured, execution of IS, which includes adjustments and refinements as IS progressed, and submission of final proof/project.
>
> I began each IS planning process with a different degree of confidence. For example, my first student-designed independent study, "American Prose and Poetry, 1900-1930," was the instructor's creation, whereas the "Willa Cather" IS seemed to bloom from inside of me and plunge ahead like a horse out for a run. For the "Willa Cather" IS I worked incredibly hard and loved every minute of it.
>
> On the other hand, "American Fiction, 1940-1980," received suggestions of books from many faculty members, thus the reading list evolved as time passed. It, too, was more work and more rewarding than the first American Lit. IS.

> The "Short Story" IS grew strangely. I had an idea and sought a faculty member's help. He was wonderfully helpful, but I failed to state my idea clearly because I simply wasn't confident in the idea. I tried to follow his lead, but the IS didn't take shape 'til I recognized the validity of my own idea, my own theory. (In short, my idea was that the short story grew out of oral tradition. As soon as I stated my theory and followed my own instincts--using the faculty member's expertise--the IS grew like a mushroom.) Thus, the designing process of this IS included many false starts and dead ends.[3]

I believe this testimony indicates in a rough way how this student moved from less to more autonomy through her pursuit of independent study. Certainly as I look at her progress, having worked with her early in her career at Metro, I am admiring of what she has been able to do.

As I've described our practices with independent study, I hope you've gotten some sense of our quality control measures. But let me review those measures and add to them a few others we have in place.

First, in the Individualized Educational Planning Course, or IEP, we teach students what we mean by college level learning, as well as how to use independent study in their degree programs. In my IEP's I require students to design a student-designed independent study, whether or not they intend to put it in their degree plans. Often, students fall in love with their ideas and decide to keep them.

On the faculty training side, we have offered training in designing and supervising independent study. We take training very seriously at Metro and our faculty love it.

Our Community Faculty Handbook, used as a resource during and after initial training, contains a chapter on independent study with lots of practical advice. Among other materials used to train faculty is our detailed "Guidelines for Evaluators," which we use especially with external evaluators for experiential learning, but which is routinely attached to all learning contracts. This sheet is an ever present reminder to all faculty that they are accountable to university standards for every study unit they undertake with students. In addition, all

narrative evaluations are reviewed by assessment staff for adherence to those standards.

The Metro U individual advisor is an important part of the quality control system. It is the advisor who helps the student maintain the integrity of the degree program, so every independent study must be seen in that context. In addition, in the case of student-designed independent studies, the advisor helps the student find appropriate content consultants and instructors and signs off on proposals.

The four academic centers of the university, as I've said, receive, review, and oversee faculty-designed independent studies and serve as consultants and brokers for student-designed independent studies.

The independent study office keeps track of all independent studies and collects data on them. The staff help students from time to time who need procedural assistance with this mode of learning. They collect student evaluations, have them summarized, and distribute them to academic centers for review and followup. We learn a good deal from student evaluations as individual teachers and as an institution.

We learn, for example, that adult students value organization and complain bitterly when it isn't apparent in independent study materials. Well-organized independent studies, with regular, reviewed assignments, are well-received, even when the subject matter is very difficult. Students do better when the work is organized into units, or weekly assignments, with clear deadlines specified. When I train faculty, I always remind them that for busy adults, with many conflicting claims on their time, assignments without deadlines come last. Students I advise tell me that they prefer classes because facing the teacher once a week keeps them accountable. I maintain that, often, a well-designed independent study can do the same.

The possibility of personal contact, by phone or in person, seems to make a big

difference in how students regard a given independent study. This may have something to do with the lower completion rate in the Business and Public Administration area, where faculty prefer less contact with students. The overall completion rate at Metro, incidentally, is 60 to 65%. The highest rate is in Arts and Sciences independent studies and the lowest in Business and Public Administration.

I said above that regularly reviewed assignments are important. The primary complaint I've heard about independent study is that some faculty do not return work with written feedback, or, at least, clear feedback. Students are very grateful for remarks and suggestions on how to improve their work.

Given the nature of adult students and their need to relate theory to practice, I have to include in my remarks about successful practices in independent study the practice of giving students an opportunity to apply what they are learning to some issue they have. The "Civil Liberties" independent study did this beautifully.

I want to note here that you can't have a successful independent study if you can't get students to sign up. Faculty must write interesting descriptions of their independent studies in the catalog to capture the attention of their audience. I've been amazed at what a difference this makes in students' willingness to consider independent study.

Finally, I can't overemphasize the importance of having students evaluate independent study. We are capable of self-deception about our own work. If I think I've written wonderful instructions but I consistently read in my student evaluation summaries that my materials are not clear, I must pay attention.

Having noted successful practices in independent studies, I may have indicated by implication what some of the problems are. But there are more. Dressel and Thompson do a fine job of laying out the problems.[4] One of the most serious is faculty resistance. I maintain, though, that in every

institution there are faculty who might be interested in doing independent study or who could be won over. Faculty and administration will need to work together to address workload or union contract issues. If time normally spent in the classroom, in addition to regular planning time, is spent developing written materials, the time involved in many independent studies should not be prohibitive.

As we increase the number of quality independent studies offered, another problem should be ameliorated, that of the low image of independent study. When some people think of independent study, they think of a student floundering around on her own without direction. I think this is an indictment of the supervisor more than anything else.

I would speak finally to students' fear of independent study. Most students who think they would be called upon to operate totally independently in academic work know that they would be floundering around and they are justifiably reluctant to choose this mode of learning. I suggest we have a job before us as educators--to educate ourselves about how to promote independence in learning and then to educate our students about the processes, options, and benefits thereof.

Metropolitan State University

STUDENT-DESIGNED INDEPENDENT STUDY PROPOSAL

FOR OFFICE USE ONLY	
Subcode #	FY
Title	
Date Registration Processed	

Student Name _____ SS# _____ Date _____

Metro U Advisor Signature _____
(not the instructor's signature) (signature indicates approval)

Competence Statement: _____

_____

_____

This competence is: ☐ in the approved degree plan; ☐ an amendment to the approved degree plan.

I. Instructor Information

Name _____ ☐ Resident Faculty ☐ Community Faculty

If the instructor is not a Metro U resident or community faculty member, you must provide the following information and attach a copy of the instructor's resume.

Address: _____ Phone: (H) _____

_____ (W) _____

II. Resource Materials

A. Books

Title _____ Author _____

Title _____ Author _____

Title _____ Author _____

B. Journals/Magazines

Title _____

Title _____

Title _____

C. Other Resources (please describe fully) _____

_____

_____

III. Learning Outline

List topics to be addressed in this independent study: (please use reverse side of this form if necessary)

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____
6. _____
7. _____
8. _____

OVER

IV. Learning Strategies

Describe briefly the learning strategies that will be used. That is, how will you carry out this independent study?

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

V. By what techniques will the independent study be evaluated?

- ☐ research paper
- ☐ journal
- ☐ objective test
- ☐ essay test
- ☐ project evaluation
- ☐ oral exam
- ☐ completion of written exercises
- ☐ simulation exercise
- ☐ performance test
- ☐ situational observation
- ☐ Other (please describe) _____

A copy of this form, signed by your Metro U faculty advisor, should accompany your registration. If you have already mailed in your registration, send this form to:

Independent Study Office
Metropolitan State University
121 Metro Square Building
St. Paul, Minnesota 55101
612/296-7148

JB/djs
6/9/83

NOTES

1. Dressel, Paul and Mary Thompson. Independent Study. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1973, p. 1.
2. Personal correspondence from Robert C. Fox to the author, dated December 30, 1976.
3. Personal correspondence from Audrey DeLaMartre to the author, undated (received in June, 1983).
4. Op. cit.